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WHY DO WE LAUGH?

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ONLY those who have taken the world seriously can see the humor of it, and only those who have a keen sense of humor can afford to take it seriously. The funny grows out of the serious as much as it grows out of the humorous. It is only in so far as the ancients took themselves and their dogmas seriously that we can laugh at them; when we find them laughing at themselves we have hit upon something worthy of our serious consideration, for their laughter is the gauge of their seriousness.

It is the serious which unwittingly reveals the shallows, as it is the comic which often plumbs the serious to its depths. It is only because the child takes his pretensions seriously that we find them funny; his merriment is not itself funny, though it may sympathetically arouse us to share his laughter. In the latter case, however, we laugh with rather than at him. Oliver Wendell Holmes has said that we start by laughing with a man at his jokes, but in course of time come to laugh at him. This happens only when he attaches too much importance to his jokes.

As laughter is one way of appraising the serious, so the comic must be taken seriously if it is to be rated at its true value. No one understands a joke by laughing at it; he laughs at it because he understands it. He must moreover, understand it in a flash, not by a gradually dawning comprehension. To arouse laughter, his appreciation of the "point" of the joke must be almost instantaneous, however long he may be in preparing for that appreciation. He must have a direct and clear intuition of the situation, rather than a dim consciousness of it. He must see it in its fullness rather than in its parts.

Laughter is essentially a social phenomenon, almost as much so as is language itself, the two being very similar in origin as in function. "Laugh and the world laughs with you" may be true when there is a world society; at present, "Laugh and your social group laughs with you" would come nearer the truth. Or let us put it differently and say that when you laugh and how you laugh depends upon how and when your group laughs, much as your sentiments and language are determined by the sentiments and

language of the group. As people mumble to themselves, so they may chuckle to themselves; yet laughter is no occupation of a Robinson Crusoe, but the pursuit of a man whose life is spent amid that of his fellows. Laughter, moreover, serves a useful purpose in group life, especially on the lower levels where solidarity and uniformity are necessary in the competition with surrounding groups. It implies a common standard and is an efficient instrument in holding the group to that standard—a much more efficient instrument than scolding. A man who cannot laugh is no social being and is scarcely human. We find no human societies in which laughter does not figure as part of the social life, as, in fact, a part of the group language. If scorn is the lash, laughter is the jolly policeman who keeps the social traffic going after the approved manner, whose power inheres not in itself, but lies in the tribal standard which it bodies forth. Ethnologists have not found a group of human beings who are devoid of laughter of this sort. A few examples of the expression and repression of laughter in primitive society will make clear its social utility.

In their perverted pedagogy, the Australians teach the youths what to do by showing them the things they should not do. As part of the ordeal of training through which the young men pass when being initiated into the tribal life, the old men perform ridiculous pranks which the youth must watch, always restraining the laughter which they tend to give way to at sight of these exhibitions. A large part of these initiation ceremonies is designed to give the young men a respect for their elders, this being one way of inculcating such respect. Laughter at a person is, in a sense, an assertion of superiority to him, and the youths may not risibly make such assertion. The performance would be ridiculous if done by any other than the aged. Performance by the aged takes it out of the realm of the laughable, for the elders set the standards for the group. An aged Fijian told Erskine that he was going out to bury himself because he could not stand the jeers and laughter of the ladies of the tribe, and said some caustic things about the callousness of a European who did not care whether he was laughed at or not. An Eskimo has little of the sensitiveness which we associate with the intimacies of domestic life, but he cannot stand the derision and laughter of a rival. He will sometimes break over the tribal rules and kill the man who laughs at him. He laughs best who laughs last—that is his argument, and it is a convincing last word in the dispute. The tribesmen in the plains area of North America are among the most tireless and daring warriors in all primitive society, yet they can not stand the laughter, directed against them, of their fellow-men. Laughter is one

of the principal means of holding in line the members of the various warlike organizations which flourish in these tribes. A man of one of these societies who resents the abduction of his wife by a fellow-member, this being no violation of the rules of his order, is laughed at by the other members of the organization until his resentment passes.

Let these examples suffice. They show that laughter is a means of expressing and maintaining the group standard. It reminds people of their place in the social group and is an efficient, if gentle, reminder that they had better keep where they belong. It is an expression of the proprieties of the occasion to which the individual must attend.

When a person laughs at himself, he is, in the main, assuming the group standard, applying to himself the standards which the group applies to him. He assumes in his own person the duties of policing his conduct.

Little wonder, then, that the group should regard with serious concern the individual who is lacking in the faculty of laughter. He is largely on a par with the man who can not render military service to the group, who can not serve his fellows in the very important enterprise of bringing into effective use that group standard which makes for unity, though for unity at the price of uniformity. He may be amenable to group standards, but he is useless in the important task of holding others to that standard.

Laughter, it follows, is individually as well as socially self-preservative. The laughter of the virtuous man is not that of the vicious, for the virtuous and the vicious belong to different groups and are maintaining different standards. There is no equality in which there is no equality of laughter, no democracy in which there is no democracy of laughter, no shifting of standards unless there is a shifting in the things which elicit laughter.

There are, of course, marked intellectual elements in laughter. The individual may laugh at the group and at their laughter. Whether he does so depends upon his appreciation of group standards and upon his acceptance of them. His laughter at them expresses this assumed superiority over them.

Perhaps the most frequent intellectual element in the situations which elicit laughter is recognition of the unusual or of the unexpected. This frequently harks back to appreciation of departure from, or unexpected conformity with, group standards. We suddenly perceive the situation as in keeping with, or as out of keeping with, the social program, as a neat way of humiliating the haughty, subduing the insubordinate, or thwarting an unexpected departure from social routine. The intellectual element is largely social.

A like-minded social reference tints the psychological elements accompanying laughter. The experience is usually pleasurable, though this is conditioned by the extent to which our laughter is taken up by others who are present, that is, by the extent to which it is appreciated by the group. To laugh when no one laughs with you may be painful.

Laughter is not always elicited by the pleasurable, nor is it always the expression of pleasure. It may be a means of expressing displeasure at personal pretensions. We may laugh in spite of ourselves, though to the spite of another, and to our shame and remorse, ashamed and sorry even while we laugh. These uncontrollable outbursts show the extent to which we are held in the grip of the group standard, and the extent to which we enjoy our assumed superiority.

This sense of elation upon the part of the laugher is almost always present. It is not the mechanism of the man who stumbles or fumbles which arouses our laughter, as Bergson would have us believe; it is rather our elation at our own superiority. If we know that we must immediately pass through a similar test and will do no better than did he, his action is to us not nearly so funny as it would otherwise be. We laugh at the sprightly middle-aged man whose sight and agility should have saved him from the banana peel; but we pity rather than laugh at the aged cripple who had not these aids of discrimination and ready reflexes. Yet the latter action is much more mechanical than the former. It is true we recognize our superiority to the latter, but we do not recognize it in any sense of elation, for we have not placed ourselves on the same plane for comparison. With the middle-aged man who is like unto us it is different: he indiscreetly does what our discretion would not permit us to do. The behavior of the feeble-minded elicits no laughter from those who have a lively sense of what feeble-mindedness means; but these same actions may elicit laughter from those who do not know that the performer is feeble-minded, or for whom this information conveys no real knowledge of his condition. We laugh, in fact, not so much at the act as at the person performing the act. This is as true of the situation on the stage as of those in daily life, when alone as when in a group. Pascal asked: Why do we laugh at a fool, but do not laugh at the cripple? and answered: The one is crippled in mind, but does not know it; the other is crippled in body, but knows it. But, as was mentioned, if he is a congenital mental cripple, we do not laugh at him; it is only because he ought to know better that we laugh at him, never because he can not know better.

Now laughter, like any other social tendency, easily overflows

the channels of its social usefulness and may become a social calamity rather than a social blessing. We often find it purposeless rather than purposive, controverting rather than supporting the principles which we have laid down. This may call for a more careful orientation but does not contradict our explanation of origin and function. As you can not disprove the physiological utility of hunger and appetite by pointing to dyspepsia, nor the use of language by pointing to solecism, so you can not disprove the use of laughter by pointing to its misuse.

If the above explanation of laughter arouses the laughter of the critic who reads these pages, his hilariousness will prove my point, for it will be an expression of his intellectual disapproval and of his personal elation of superiority; and if he does not laugh at it, but takes it seriously, I assume that he has discovered in it some elements of truth which may turn the laugh on rival theories.